

Raymond Williams' Notion of Culture: A Life of Metis in the Perception of Louis Riel

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Abstract:

A standard approach to turn back to the history of Métis is genealogy-based methodology. It is a community in Canada known and recognised within the communities. The term itself opens the struggles and issues of the people. An argument on the identity of Métis is still questioned in the society, demanding the people to answer individually. However, the rights of law persist in the Canadian Constitution and it is unbothered. Unlike other countries, Canada has distinct peoples like First Nations, Métis, and Inuit as Indigenous or Aboriginal peoples. Métis feel that they do not have any true representation of themselves as they are treated with biased everywhere they go. This paper analyses the backdrop of social interactions and narrows down to the Métis and their community by retelling the history of the native.

Keywords: Culture, Identity, Domination, Residual, and Racial Discrimination

The Complexity of culture is to be found not only in its variable processes and their social definitions-traditions, institutions, and formations-but also in the dynamic interrelations, at every point in the process, of historically varied and variable elements. (121)

Raymond Williams' notion on culture and literary theory juxtapose with each other. Both cannot stand individually in a perfect way without using each other's techniques which are inextricably linked. Culture is an effective and dynamic process where the stereotyped

system of politics and economy are interlinked. It affects the complete arrangement and structure that the community follows and culture influences most of them. Through culture, one can easily understand the meaning of literature and the fundamental study that focuses on society. Without society or culture, nothing can be defined as literature. Williams suggested his opinion in many ways. According to him, culture is a “general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development” (2). It is a particular way of life of people, period or a group that refers to the rituals or habits that a community or group follows. It also concerns the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity referring to effective social practices.

To him, culture coexists within society and it forms a whole way of life of the human being. When society makes everyone learn how they should lead the way, a human being's experience becomes the model of change by learning new skills, shifting affairs, and trying to correlate different languages and ideas. There are no typical followings, comparisons, or meanings in society unless people shape it with convenience and perception. Marxists say that the culture is entirely class-dominated and intentionally curbed the mass that are under the economically and socially low class. Williams broadly accepts that those people are considered ignorant.

It concerns the ideology of residue that matters in the world of Métis. Métis are an Indigenous people whose historical homelands includes Canada's three Prairie Provinces as well as parts of British Columbia, the Northwest Territories, Northwest Ontario, and the Northern United States. They are referred as the original dwellers of the land. The Inuit's people are those Ab originals who have occupied and inhabited the northern regions of Canada. Their homeland, called Inuit Nunangat, denotes land, water, and ice of the Arctic region. They are hunters and gatherers who move from one camp to another periodically. First Nations are

the natives of Canada; they are neither Métis nor Inuit. The people of Métis are in the state of residue for more than a century. As Williams suggested:

What I mean by 'Residual' is very different. The Residual, by definition, has been formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. (122)

People who belong to different communities have many experiences. They follow rituals and values that cannot add to the dominant culture but are seen and practised in this ideology. Though the practice of various religions or customs was prevalent in the past, the culture that could not change or would not change itself is alternatively oppositional in its meanings. Here, the people of Métis in Canada are trapped in the world of dominance, though they live gloriously in their past. Dominance would not allow the residual to grow among others. Many novels talk about such a particular community. Moreover, many voices become bold and loud from the side of Métis to make them popular among the society, both in an optimistic and pessimistic way. Active way of residual people in the community has been drafted here with practical situations and incidents. The pain and loss of native communities urge them to preserve their indigenous nationhood. Gerald R. Alfred shares his view as:

The words *Métis* and *mixed-blood* possess no social or scientific validation because blood mixture is not a measurement of consciousness, culture or human experiences, but the word Métis is a source of notable and radical identification. Louis Riel, for example, one of the great leaders of the Métis, declared a new mixed-blood nation in the last century. He was convicted of "high treason" and executed. (ix)

The Canadian government makes various protections for their people through treaties and acts that ensure the rights of indigenous people. One of the acts under section 35, Constitution Act, 1982, says,

In Europe during the sixteenth century, well-dressed men wore high felt hats, and beaver fur made an excellent waterproof felt cloth with strong fibres that retained for years the shape and height of the hat. Fur-trading companies were formed which paid large sums of money to adventures who would trade for beaver pelts in North America. (RP 07)

The community of Métis is established in 1600 on the east coast of Canada. They are called mixed blood of Indian and White. Mothers are Indians and the fathers are the fur traders who come from Britain and France. The children of Métis speak both the languages of their parents. Some become traders and some are sent to Quebec or Great Britain to get quality education. These educated people are hired as clerks in the fur companies. “The fur trade expanded, and as it grew so did the Métis, who in time called themselves *The New Nation*.” (RP 07), when the Indian traders start moving towards north, west, and south, followed by Métis and fur-trading companies closely move behind.

As the Métis grew in numbers, the Indians decreased, being killed by wars and European diseases. The Métis were not so badly affected by these diseases, probably because they had better access to the white man’s medicine and perhaps because their mixed blood provided some immunity. (RP 09)

Métis supply meat for the travelers who carry fur crossing distances in the canoes. They provide hides from the buffalo for the clothing of traders and the left-out meat is preserved as pemmican. The most savage behaviour between the Métis and the Indians arose when more buffaloes must be killed to meet the demands of fur companies’ staff. Here ends the

independent way of life for both Indians and Métis. As a result, hunting and trapping are enlarged as mentioned here:

In the early spring, hundreds of Métis families from various settlements would gather on the plains along the banks of the Assiniboine, in what is now known as Manitoba, to prepare for the annual buffalo hunt. They formed a caravan of 1500 to 2000 ox-driven red River carts accompanied by hundreds of horses and many dogs. A captain and councillors would be elected to make and enforce laws so that there would be no trouble in the community. The bravest young men with the swiftest horses were chosen as scouts to ride ahead of the caravan looking for buffalo or Indian war parties. A Roman Catholic priest usually travelled with the caravan to hold mass and to bless the scouts each day. (RP 15)

The evening is spent in smoking, visiting, singing, and dancing in their teepees when animals have corralled. They have a standard method of hunting known as running the buffalo. They will not be allowed to hunt until they get a signal from their captain and will stay until they demand meat. Later, Métis sell those pelts for their livelihood. This is how they lead them throughout life. Home is where kinship and connections are present.

Usually, the family of Métis is large and bound together with a maximum number of children and grandparents. Being loyal to one another, Métis are always protective and share whatever they have with each other. Though they respect and follow the practices and beliefs of the Indians, most of them are Roman Catholics, Anglican, and Methodist. Consequently, they get married in a church that is followed by dancing and feasting. Perhaps, the thing they follow is that they never divorce one another because it is not acceptable in their Catholic church. If they find it hard to live together, they can be separated but never marry again.

Although they are happy in their surroundings, they yearn to be educated. But education is not easy to obtain because, they need to travel far away which costs a great deal of money to get an education. As already stated, some who get education choose to be a priest in the church. Children of Métis grow by learning the story of settlement from the storytellers whose songs and legends have passed through generations. This makes them proud of being a Métis and makes them live together and socialise with everyone. Antonie S. Lussier and D. Bruce Sealey illustrate a vibrant description of fiddle playing in Canada in *The Other Natives*:

Dancing was a favourite form of recreation. The Métis learned from their mothers the dances of the Plains Indians and the reels and square dances of Scotland from their fathers. They combined the intricate footwork of the Indians with the Scottish forms. The fiddle, a favourite of the Scots, became the beloved instrument of the Métis. Lacking the finances to buy imported European fiddles, they quickly learned to make their own from maple wood and birch bark. Some travellers sarcastically noted that lacking other instruments with which to tune their fiddles; the Métis used the cry of the loon and the bellow of a rutting moose. (18)

Until the last hours, they enjoy being in the prairie or the forest with the campfire. The music they play is full of emotive, heart-rending, and indelible. Those who still follow the customs could not forget their rituals and most of them continue to write poems and songs today.

Every community has a particular set of practices. In the same way, Métis also possesses some specific way of music and dance. Consequently, following many traditional games, singing, fiddling and jigging is the most essential part of them. They love to dance, sing, and spend their time together in the period of recess. One of their favourite instruments is

the Scottish fiddle, though they are used to play other instruments like concertina and mouth trap. “Little girls played with dolls of tanned hide and rags made by their grandmothers and spent hours sewing clothes for their dolls. The men who were fond of whittling wood - carved animals and other small figures and made whistles from red willows” (RP 22).

However, men love to dance and sing. They like to gamble and argue about politics. Women mostly spend their leisure time in sewing, conversing, and playing with children. Sometimes it involves gambling with men. They are well established in decorative items like beadwork and silk embroidery. “The clothing worn by the Métis combined fashions worn by Europeans and Indians, with perhaps more colour and individual style” (30). It is taken from deerskins and moose hides and the cloth is made at home by women. Usually, women are very stylish in their fashionable clothing. Those clothes are both attractive and serviceable. Skirts with full-sleeved colourful blouses are worn and footwear is beaded with moccasins and velvet. Children dress up in style followed by the adults. Many hunters have used a method called running the buffalo where they are equipped with many guns. This is a dangerous business but they feel it as their prime entertainment.

Men on horseback would ride through the stampeding herd, shooting prime animals. Once a shot was fired, the hunter had to pour some more powder from his buffalo horn into the muzzle of the gun. It spits in one of the lead balls he carried in his mouth and hit the hunt but on his saddle to shake down the powder and ball. All this was done as he raced his horse among the stampeding buffalo. If a horse stepped into a gopher hole or if the rider became dismounted for any other reasoning, his hours as a buffalo hunter were probably numbered to mere seconds. Perhaps a ball would turn on him, or a stray shot could bring him down. Or he may have loaded his rifle too fast or not correctly enough, and it could

explode and blow his handoff. The hunt required steady nerves, much skill, and expertise in horsemanship and marksmanship. (SAR 70)

Traditional food passes through generations over generations. Buffalo meat is the mainstay of their diet even after eating fish, moose, antelope, rabbits, and prairie chickens. Gellette is a favourite filling of Métis which is a bannock kept for long periods. They have followed a specific practice for themselves. They are very lively in enjoying their music, dance, and food.

Some gloriously spend the days through storytelling, when people enjoy listening. Stories give life to their community as they reminiscent of their history and narrate it with the generations. Many stories change the form and shape the society. It is the most beautiful part of their history because it efficiently preserves their culture. It transmits the cultural aesthetics which structured their identity and highlighted their differences from other communities. Story narration has different kinds serving various purposes. It stands as the pillar of human existence in a community that shares more information and knowledge to young educators. Moreover, stories tend to be a palliative measure rather than pain. This time of prosperity ends around 1850s.

The pleasant days of Métis are followed by the first rebellion in the year 1869. Political organisations begin to secure their place in the country. Métis send letters and petitions to the Canadian government to restore the land they have claimed because they fear it would be given to the east's surveyors. "On 11th October 1869, near St. Norbert in what is now Manitoba, a party of Métis led by Louis Riel prevented surveyors from mapping the land. The Métis argued that the northwest tradition, 'He who occupies and uses the land is the owner.' meant that the land was theirs" (RP 40).

Louis Riel is a highly religious and pious leader of the Métis Council. He was born on 22nd October 1844 in Manitoba and educated in Quebec. After becoming president of the Council of Métis in January 1870, Riel sends many representatives to the government to claim their rights. The requests are:

- A legislature of elected Métis
- Representation in the Canadian parliament
- The vote for every man covers twenty-one years of age.
- The use of both French and English in courts and local government.
- Land for schools and roads.
- A railway to Winnipeg, which had not yet been scheduled as a railway stop.
- A steamship service between Lake Superior and the Red River.
- Confirmation of Métis privileges and customs. (RP 41)

As a result of this delegation, they created a province of Manitoba on 12th May 1870. Métis being happy all the time assume that they possess their rights. But they never realize that they have achieved what they want. Louis Riel is often punished in the rebellion process and the Canadian government expels him for five years. Riel goes to the United States and the Métis people in Canada show their faithfulness towards him by electing him to the parliament though he is not permitted to do so. The Canadian soldiers show their wrong and harmful sides towards Métis by humiliating and assassinating the leaders of Métis. Many Métis escape to the United States from the abasement of their pride. Many confederations are formed to attack the community. Then white immigrants occupy the area of Métis, and started constructing their homes.

Many of the Métis move to the west to survive and start pursuing their past life in the Saskatchewan rivers banks. Gabriel Dumont heads them to resolve their claims when they do

not know how to read and write. They get the support of the white settlers, who are already facing many problems. However, Dumont understands their people's problems and needs in terms of education, political and legal issues. The Second Rebellion in 1885 follows in order to claim lands for some of the Métis. Many consider Riel to be a maniac, rogue, and criminal. However, he is their leader with vision, empathy, resilience, and integrity. Today, Métis and the followers of Riel have made their residence in small rural areas and cities.

Later in the twentieth century, people of Métis occupy the places around Canada and the northern part of the United States. They are under the Métis National Council (MNC) entity and in the US Royal Commission of Aboriginal People (RCAP). People who identify and accept them as Métis are encouraged to be a part of the entity. However, many researches turn up and describe this community. Despite that no one can get a clear definition of them. The state of confusion prevails in every mind and there is a lack of understanding concerning their historical implications.

The sense of belonging, the idea of self, and being a Métis are the only thought they have. They have many questions in mind like, Who are they?, Where are they from?, What is the need of Métis?, Is Métis a halfbreed?, What is wrong in being a halfbreed? etc. This is so powerful to talk about. As Williams puts it, the experiences, meanings, and values of the residual forms are not part of the actual dominant culture. It is effectively different from either residual or emergent. This paper gathers information regarding Métis people who are still in the residue state and focuses on their difficult memories, pain, and traumas. The effective way of residual culture is known only when the dominance attributes in society are revealed. Bullying people socially, ethically, sexually, and physically is done only to damage their reputation. It includes suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, illicit affairs, prostitution, racial problems, and domestic violence. It represents the entire discourse of this paper and the

negative side of Canada's colonisation. People are labelled as Métis, halfbreed, and many more. The practice of labelling them as such is one of the significant aspects which make each Métis feel like the other, as if they do not belong to that place. Disrespectful attitude towards the generalisation of the characters of Métis are seen in society and has become a stereotype with the word, halfbreed. Though residual is influentially established in the past, the impact is actively seen in the present scenario.

Hence, with or without the consciousness of themselves, the Métis experience the oppression and subjugation. To understand and explore the real condition of Métis, the dominance of the white people must be seen. Métis community meets with white people's condition of domination in foster homes and in other places.

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